

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Jens F. Larson
1891-1982

On June 13, 1930 the Colby College trustees voted to move their school "if and when feasible" to a new site.¹ This dramatic decision came after a state commission found the college's downtown Waterville campus unsuitable for future expansion. Despite the Great Depression, the college pushed forward with plans to relocate, commissioning architect Jens Fredrick Larson to design a new campus on Mayflower Hill. Over the next thirty years Larson planned twenty-four buildings for Colby in the Georgian Revival style.

Jens Fredrick Larson was born the son of Leonard Larson, a sculptor, in Boston, Massachusetts, on August 10, 1891.² His first exposure to architecture and painting appears to have been a 1906 trip to Europe with his father. Later, family financial difficulties forced Jens Larson to leave high school and take a job with an architect for two dollars a week.

With little formal training, Larson's skill as an architect was largely self-taught. Between 1907 and 1910 he studied at the Boston Architectural Club and took high school classes in the evening. While completing his only formal architectural education at the Harvard Graduate School of Applied Sciences, Larson also worked as a draftsman in the office of Boston architect Clarence H. Blackall.³

Moving to Canada, Larson was employed by Brown and Vallence in Montreal, where he may have been introduced to the design of college buildings. The young architect then went to Scotland, first working for Sir James Burnet and then in London for Edward Colcut, president of the Royal British Institute of Architects, before returning to Montreal.⁴ When World War I broke out in 1914, Larson enlisted in the First Canadian Division and was later accepted by the Royal Flying Corps. Finding little work in Montreal after the war, he returned to Boston and apparently advanced from "office boy" to chief designer for James McLaughlin. McLaughlin specialized in the design of school buildings, which probably provided inspiration for Larson's developing interest in academic architecture.

Jens Larson began his career in college design after moving to Hanover, New Hampshire, in 1919, where he had been hired as architect in residence to review Dartmouth College's development since the war. Soon after his arrival at Dartmouth, he entered into partnership with Harry Artemus Wells.⁵ Wells had graduated from Dartmouth in 1910 and from the Thayer School of Engineering in 1911. After working in New York and New Foundland, Wells returned to Dartmouth in 1913 to become Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds.⁶ During their six year partnership, Larson and Wells designed several new buildings at Dartmouth and in the area. When the partnership was dissolved in 1926, Larson became an instructor in modern art and architecture at Dartmouth in addition to his practice as an architect specializing in college planning and design.

After rejecting a 1916 plan for development on the existing downtown Waterville campus by Francis Asbury Robinson of Boston, it became clear that Colby College would one day have to move, a result of being confined on three sides by the Maine Central Railroad and on the other side by the Kennebec River. No action was taken until 1930, when the college resolved to move and seriously considered a number of sites.

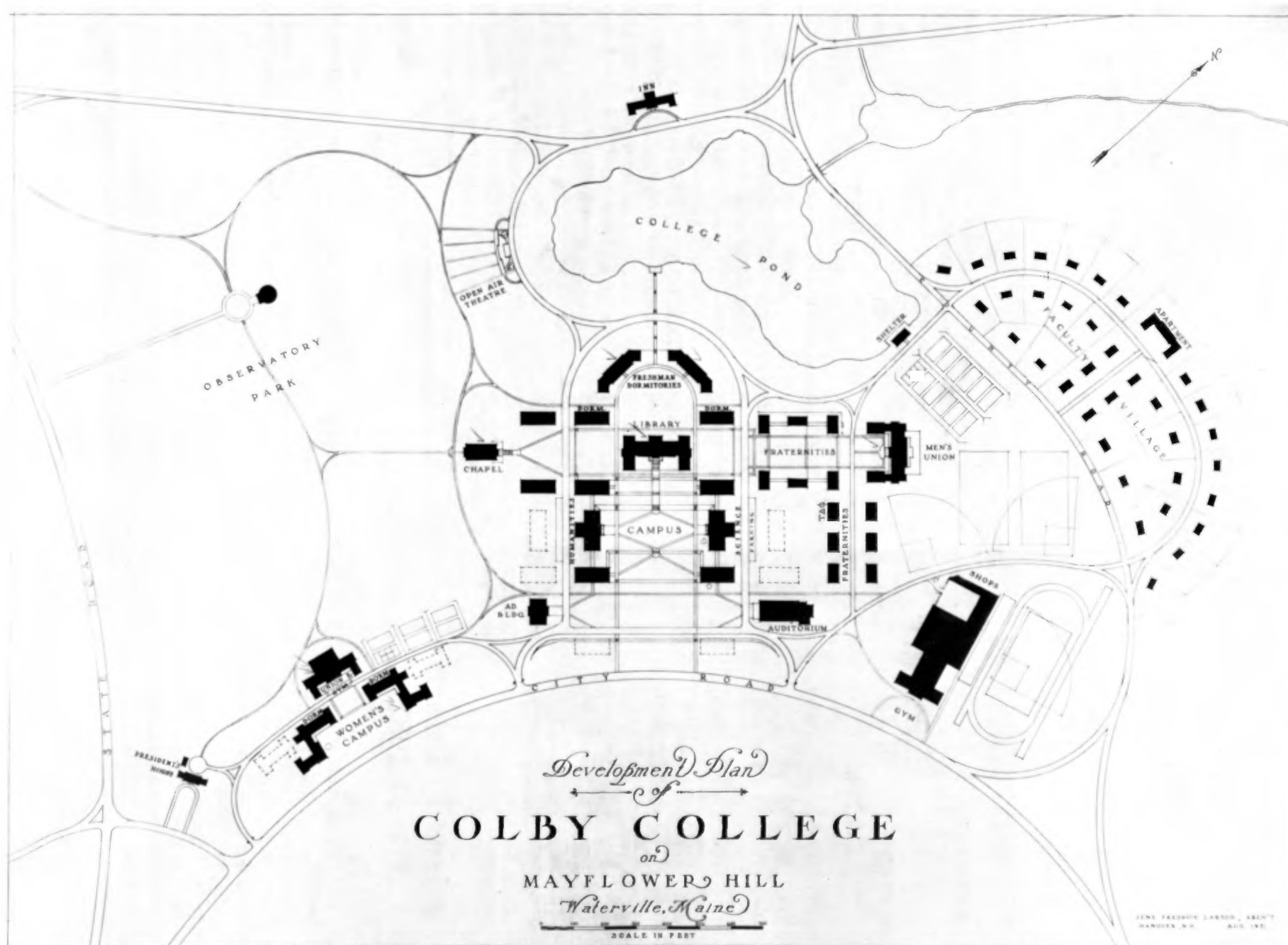


Figure 1. Development Plan for Colby College, Waterville, by Jens F. Larson, August, 1931
(Courtesy of Colby College).

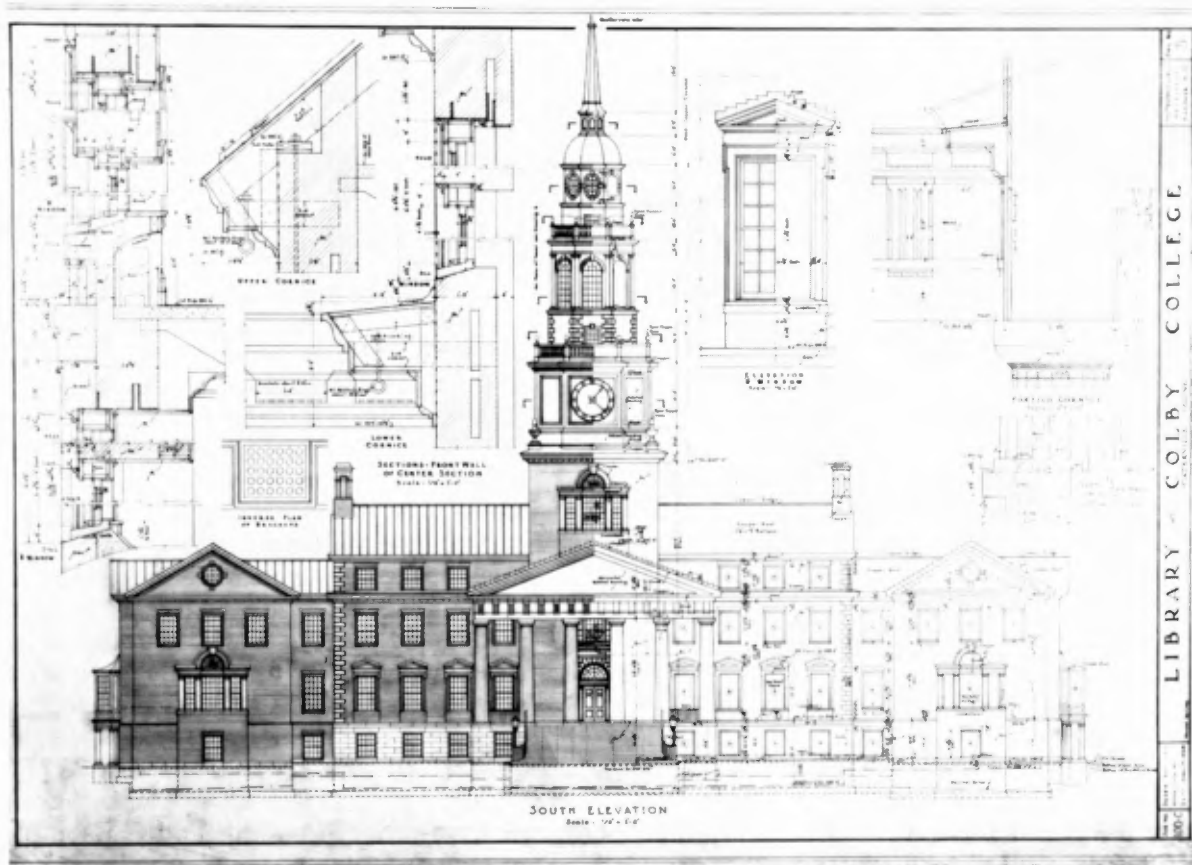


Figure 3. South Elevation of Miller Library, Colby College, 1939 drawing by Jens F. Larson (Courtesy of Colby College).

Hanover to view Larson's work at Dartmouth, and Larson visited the Mayflower Hill site where the new Colby would be built. Each man must have been pleased with what he saw, for on January 17, 1931, Larson was officially hired to develop Colby's future campus.¹⁷

At the trustees meeting on April 18, 1931, "Mr. Fred Larson presented a chart of the campus site and possible buildings and developments thereon. He was heard with great interest."¹⁸ Larson's plan utilized Beaux Arts planning principles of symmetry, axiality, focal point, and overall geometric clarity (Figure 1). All were present in the development plans for the Mayflower Hill campus, in which an extended rectangular space defined a longitudinal axis with the dominant Miller Library as the focal point and "intellectual center of the campus".¹⁹ Radiating from the library were various quadrangles—the men's union and fraternities to the north, the chapel to the south, and the long quadrangle of academic buildings to the east. On the south end of the campus was the women's campus, which was also symmetrical in plan.

Larson's formal plans and Georgian Revival architecture were among the most common choices for college design in the 1920's and 1930's. Holding fast to Beaux Arts traditions, which were present at numerous world fairs, most designers of college and university buildings rejected modern design principles. This trend continued well into the 1950's, and Colby remained faithful to Larson's predilection for Georgian

forms until 1967. Lorimer Chapel, one of the first buildings on the new campus, was designed in May of 1938 (Figure 4). It features a projecting portico supported by four Doric columns, quoins, and eight-over-eight windows. The first stage of the tower, built of brick, has a Palladian window, and the second stage has a louvered arch and is surmounted by the steeple. Characteristic of Larson's work, the chapel is detailed literally from the vocabulary of the historical Georgian style.

Miller Library, which was designed in April of 1939, resembles Larson's plan for Baker Library at Dartmouth of 1929 and is vaguely reminiscent of Independence Hall in Philadelphia. Like the chapel, the first stage of the tower is brick. The octagonal second stage serves as a clock tower, which is surmounted by another octagonal stage of round arched windows and is capped by a spire. Two symmetrical wings flank a monumental portico of six Doric columns (Figures 2, 3).

Other buildings Larson designed for Colby include Roberts Union, Runnals Union, Bixler Art and Music Center, two science buildings, an administration building, the president's house, a humanities building, seven fraternities, and several dormitories.

At the time of the college's removal from downtown Waterville to its new site, Larson's preference for the Georgian Revival style was fitting in the eyes of the college. The romantic notion of Colby as a small New England college with a long history dictated the use of this style, which embodied the way the college

The most immediate decision the college faced was whether to accept property in Augusta offered by publisher William H. Gannett. In these early stages of the trustees' study to relocate the school, Jens Larson began courting Colby President Franklin W. Johnson. In mid-April of 1930 Larson visited three potential sites and was most impressed with the Augusta property.⁷ With William Gannett providing the fees, a survey of Gannettson Park was undertaken in July, and in August Larson began confidential studies for his vision of Colby in Augusta.⁸

On July 11, 1930, Larson wrote to Johnson proposing that once a site was chosen he would personally finance general layouts as well as preliminary sketches of buildings. Only after the first building was fully designed would he charge a fee of six per cent. However, before choosing an architect, President Johnson sought the advice of others on the site options. In early September Henry Shepley of the Boston architectural firm of Coolidge, Shepley, Bulfinch and Abbott visited the proposed sites and recommended the Augusta property.⁹ By October Larson had sent Johnson plot plans and a perspective of the proposed Augusta campus, in which the majority of the buildings were placed around a pond in two axial quadrangles with a row of buildings in alignment with the State House to the east.¹⁰ Larson appears to have been convinced at that point that Augusta would be chosen as the new site, which is reflected by the plans he produced. These plans also served to demonstrate his skill as an architect to Colby.

The pressure to remain in Waterville mounted, especially after news spread that one of the site options being considered was Augusta. Appealing as the Augusta site may have been, Johnson may also have been using Augusta as a way of gaining financial and moral support for a new Waterville campus. The college's 117 year history, many argued, was reason enough to remain, and ultimately the trustees voted on November 21, 1930, resolving:

That a committee of seven be appointed by the Chairman to draw up plans for future procedure, to definitely select a site in Waterville, to develop a complete plan of organization for the removal of the college from its present site to the proposed site... This committee [is] to report its doings at the next meeting of the Board of Trustees, either regular or special and to be authorized to engage such assistance whether if architects or others as it may deem necessary.¹¹

The decision to hire Jens F. Larson as college architect appears to have been concurrent with the choice of Mayflower Hill as the new site for the college. After Colby abandoned a move to Augusta, Larson, who had expressed interest in the project even if Augusta were not chosen, remained the front runner for the job. President Johnson, however, did consider contacting James Gamble Rogers, a noted college architect who had designed buildings at Yale and Northwestern, but this apparently never materialized.¹²

A number of other architectural firms prepared preliminary plans or contacted Colby for consideration. Desmond and Lord apparently favored the Messalonskee/Kennebec site, and Stiles and VanKleuk of Boston submitted layouts of three Waterville sites.¹³ A memo by Carl Rust Parker, a landscape architect with the Olmsted firm, in Brookline, Massachusetts, indicates that the firm of Coolidge and Carlson of Boston had prepared a preliminary plan without compensation. President Johnson met Parker in 1929, at which time Johnson inquired about landscape plans.¹⁴ Almost a year later Johnson wrote the Olmsted firm, who had sent him photographs of their work at several preparatory schools and indicated that when the college's move progressed further he would contact them about landscaping.¹⁵ By 1932 Colby had retained the Olmsted firm, and it continued to use these landscape architects into the 1950s.¹⁶ However, Larson's proximity to Colby and his role as official architect of the Association of American Colleges all but assured him the job. In December of 1930 President Johnson traveled to



Figure 2. Rendering of Colby College Campus by Jens F. Larson, 1931 (Courtesy of Colby College).

viewed itself. Given the tradition of colleges like Harvard, whose Massachusetts Hall dates to 1718 and Dartmouth, whose Dartmouth Hall was built in 1784, it is not surprising that Colby chose Georgian forms to establish its new identity. The designs attempted to instantly identify with the college's past when it left its nineteenth century campus. Yet the real success of Larson's work is his overall plan for Colby which created a college community with character.

Reflecting his characteristic preference for the Georgian style, Larson recalled in 1954 that everyone agreed Colby should be "Georgian architecture in harmony with the traditional colonial architecture of Maine."²⁰ Known as a traditionalist, Larson wrote in his 1933 book *Architectural Planning of the American College*:

The skyscraper has created in the larger cities a new style in architecture adaptable to new problems of housing on small land areas of high value. This is a commercial architecture and is not entitled to influence in any way the traditional architecture of the colleges. The functional scope of the college is not rapidly or materially changing. If there is any institution in modern life which cannot cast off the past, which must be built upon the treasures of its rich inheritance, it is the college...

The styles built upon the early American tradition are still in process of development. Architects can, by working with a vocabulary based on our Classic heritage, surpass the architecture of earlier years, if they first solve the function of the building. This is in part the argument of the functionalist or modernist, but it is equally true of modern architecture based on the cultural traditions of the past. In other words, one should not copy an old existing building and adapt life to that building, but, with a vocabulary that study gives, should envisage the contemporary problem and clothe it in traditional architecture. This will in turn demand modification and transition as the problems change and as life gives new character to architecture.²¹

Larson's contentions were supported well into the mid-twentieth century and are reflected in the many colleges for which he prepared master plans and designed buildings. These included Bucknell University, Coe College, Hanover College, Lehigh University, Marietta College, University of Paris, Upsala College, and Wake Forest University.²² At the time of his death, Larson had contributed to the architecture of more than thirty colleges or universities and several preparatory schools.

Two other projects in Maine were completed by Larson. In 1940 he designed the Galen Eustis House at the head of Mayflower Hill Drive near the Colby campus.²³ Eustis, administrative vice president under Franklin Johnson, had been a friend of Larson's during the college's move, and the brick house was planned in the Colonial Revival style. Another project was a summer house in Manset for Ernest Hopkins, president of Dartmouth College. This frame house was primarily Colonial Revival in design and featured oversized shingles on the exterior.²⁴



Figure 4. Rendering of Lorimer Chapel, Colby College, by Jens F. Larson (Courtesy of Colby College).

Larson moved from New York to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in 1951 to begin work on Wake Forest University, where he designed the entire campus. His son Nils became a partner in 1955, and together they planned their final building on Colby's campus, Dana Hall, in 1965.

While deviations from Larson's master plan have been made and new styles introduced, Colby is well-known for its beautiful campus, in large part due to this architect's work. As a college and university architect, Larson produced designs which rivaled those of any architect in his specialized field, and he was a noted author on the subject of college planning. Without doubt, Jens F. Larson helped make history during Colby's "Mayflower Hill Adventure" by creating a campus with character using a style of the past.

Thomas C. Jester

NOTES

- ¹ Ernest Cummings Marriner, *The History of Colby College*, Waterville, 1962, p. 381.
- ² George S. Koyl, Editor, *American Architects Directory*, New York, 1955, p. 406.
- ³ Harvard Alumni Directory and Boston Directories.
- ⁴ Information on Larson's early career may be found in an article from an unknown newspaper dated February 10, 1960, Maine Historic Preservation Commission.
- ⁵ *American Architects Directory*, p. 406.
- ⁶ *Hanover Gazette*, January 28, 1932. Obituary of Harry Artemus Wells.
- ⁷ Larson to Johnson, April 18, 1930, Johnson Papers, Special Collections, Miller Library, Colby College. Hereinafter cited as Johnson Papers.
- ⁸ Larson to Johnson, July 11, 1930. Johnson Papers.
- ⁹ Henry Shepley to Johnson, September 8, 1930. Johnson Papers.
- ¹⁰ Larson to Johnson, September 4, 1930; September 20, 1930; October 14, 1930. Johnson Papers.
- ¹¹ Stanley A. Nicholson, "Plan for a New Colby," *Colby Alumnus*, March, 1987.
- ¹² H. S. Philbrick to Johnson, December 1, 1930. Johnson Papers. President Johnson also sought the advice of many college presidents, among whom was F. W. Boatright of the University of Richmond, who recommended the firm of Cram and Ferguson. Boatright to Johnson, April 5, 1930. Johnson Papers.
- ¹³ Nicholson, p. 12.
- ¹⁴ Memo by C. R. Parker, March 27, 1930. Papers of the Olmsted Associates, Job #1901, Box 478, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
- ¹⁵ Johnson to Olmsted Brothers, April 1, 1930. Johnson Papers.
- ¹⁶ Between 1932 and 1955, the Olmsted firm prepared over seventy landscape drawings for Colby. These drawings (Job #9101) are in the collection of the Fredrick Law Olmsted National Historic Site in Brookline, Massachusetts.
- ¹⁷ Nicholson, p. 12.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Jens Fredrick Larson, *Architectural Planning of the American College*, New York, 1933, p. 63.
- ²⁰ *Colby Alumnus*, January, 1954.
- ²¹ Larson, pp. 25-26.
- ²² A complete list of Larson's commissions is on file at the Maine Historic Preservation Commission.
- ²³ Larson Office Records, Maine Historic Preservation Commission.
- ²⁴ Plans for the Hopkins Cottage are in the possession of the Spahr Family, Manset.

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE

BY JENS F. LARSON

Colby College, Campus Plan and Buildings, Waterville, 1931-1965, Extant.
Ernest Hopkins Cottage, Manset, Southwest Harbor, 1932, Extant.
Galen Eustis House, Mayflower Hill Drive, Waterville, 1940, Extant.

ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS

Colby College has recently acquired an extensive collection of original drawings for the campus and its buildings.
Original drawings for the Hopkins Cottage are privately owned.

Photograph of Jens F. Larson
Courtesy of Colby College

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